

Interactive preaching

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Klaus Runia, in his book *The Sermon Under Attack*,¹ quotes a rather unkind definition of preaching as ‘a monstrous monologue by a moron to mutes’. In this book, which is actually a defence of preaching and a plea for more effective communication, Professor Runia explores some of the reasons why monologue preaching has been subject to such criticism. He identifies some important shifts which have taken place in the social context within which preaching is now situated and which challenge the practice of preaching.

A changing world

The first is a *cultural* shift away from passive instruction to participatory learning, from paternalism to partnership, from monologue to dialogue, from instruction to interaction. Those who teach, especially those who teach adults, no longer assume they are the experts who know everything and that their task is to convey information to others who simply receive this information. The new paradigm is of partnership, where teachers and learners work together, conscious that all bring contributions to the learning process. For preachers, this would imply that the congregation is active in discerning God’s word rather than relying wholly upon the preacher to declare it.

The second is a *societal* shift away from an integrated world to a world where networks overlap, a shift away from simplicity to complexity. We live in a world which is not only complex and diverse but a world in which rapid changes are taking place. There are very few generalists; most of us are specialists in one area or another. The education system is geared towards this, despite occasional attempts to broaden the curriculum. For preachers, this raises the issue of how to address such a complex world: the biblical text may not change but if we are concerned with application as well as interpretation, how are we to make the connections? Many preachers seem unable to relate the Bible and theology to the world of work or to issues in public life—these are areas of profound weakness in most churches. Perhaps we need the help of those in the congregation who have expertise and experience in areas where we do not.

The third is a *media* shift away from linear to non-linear methods of conveying information, from

logical argument to ‘pic ‘n’ mix’ learning. Whether we like it or not, the television age has deeply affected the way in which communication takes place and how people learn. A careful argument that takes thirty minutes to develop does not make for good viewing in the age of sound bites. Watching someone lecturing for thirty minutes, however many camera angles are used, is not an effective use of the visual media. Communication now frequently involves the use of images as well as words, short contributions from diverse points of view, and open-ended presentation that allows freedom to choose your own conclusion. For preachers, this implies not only the use of visual communication as well as verbal communication but hard challenges about the style and purpose of preaching.

These shifts can all be understood as manifestations of a larger shift in *worldview* that many argue is taking place throughout the western world. The term *postmodernity* means different things to different people and is in danger of losing its impact through over-use, but it does at least imply that the ordered, rational, structured worldview that has been dominant since the Enlightenment is under threat and that new ways of thinking are emerging. These new ways are not fully established or even fully formed yet (so counter examples can be given to the above shifts), and there may be significant changes ahead or even a return to older ways. We live in an uncomfortable and unsettling era of transition, when we must be both open to change and hesitant before jumping on bandwagons. But there is no doubt that many people in our postmodern culture do not appreciate monologue presentations. Sermons may be very poorly suited to this environment. The gradual transition from modernity to postmodernity brings with it a rejection of authoritative pronouncements, a preference for dialogue, an interest in exploring diverse options and a move towards learner-centred education.

There may be strengths and weaknesses in both approaches, but it is certain that the approach to learning has changed and our congregations are increasingly composed of those who have learned to learn in different ways, and who do not find monologue preaching that accessible. Research into the effectiveness of sermons has uncovered worrying evidence that all preachers need to take seriously. North American and

European studies have produced similar results: somewhere between 65% and 90% of those interviewed directly after the meeting ended could not say what the main point of the sermon was or what issue it was addressing. It is possible to argue that sermons are about more than information, that they impact the heart as well as the mind—but is that an adequate response? It is possible also to argue that what is needed are better sermons and more effective preachers (which is essentially the conclusion reached by Klaus Runia after examining other options)—but that may not take us to the root of the problem.

Wasted preaching

How much preaching is a sheer waste of time? We pray, we study, we reflect, we craft a sermon, we illustrate it with stories, we deliver it with passion and integrity—but it has very little impact on those who listen to it. They are too polite to say so usually, but it does not really engage their attention, address their concerns or affect their lives. Some give up after a few weeks or several years and leave our churches. How many of the thousand people a week who have left British churches in the 1980's and 1990's did so because they were bored by our sermons? Others remain and listen to perhaps 100 sermons a year, but with what result?

Jeremy Thomson, a lecturer in Religious Studies at Birkbeck College, has explored this topic in a Grove booklet entitled *Preaching as Dialogue: Is the Sermon a Sacred Cow?*² He writes in the introduction: 'For all the effort of preparing, delivering and listening to sermons, most church members are not as mature as we might expect as a result. Why is this? Of course, there are bad sermons, and there are preachers whose lives are inconsistent with their teaching. But people may listen week by week to the best prepared and presented sermons, given by thoroughly sincere preachers, and yet make little progress in Christian discipleship. Some preachers blame congregations for a lack of expectancy that God will speak, for an inability to listen to a "solid exposition", or even for disobedience to what they hear. But I suspect that there is a more significant factor in the failure rate of the sermon than the quality of the preacher or the responsiveness of the hearers. I want to suggest that the problem lies in our concept of preaching itself.'

Preaching in church history

But it is not just cultural changes or evidence that sermons are ineffective that are causing some to question the adequacy of monologue sermons. Challenges to the sermon have come also from those who have

researched its use in earlier periods of history when the cultural setting was quite different. Thomson has done some research into this and argues that what we understand as preaching may be rather different from references to preaching in the New Testament, where it was less formal and much more open to interaction. He traces the emergence of the modern sermon from the theology of the reformers (especially Martin Luther and John Calvin), which gave the sermon the central place in worship, through the writings of Karl Barth, where preaching in effect becomes the Word of God, to the more recent endorsements of monologue preaching by Martin Lloyd-Jones and John Stott. Despite this impressive lineage, there are reasons for asking whether the form has been confused with the content and whether the way God communicates with humanity has been unduly restricted. There is an important theological issue here. Does God address us from a distance and not invite our response and interaction? Or are we invited to dialogue with him?

A more extensive critique of the sermon is offered by David Norrington, whose book *To Preach or Not to Preach*³ examines evidence from the New Testament and the early centuries of church history. He argues on the basis of careful and thorough investigation that monologue preaching was present in this period but was used occasionally rather than regularly. Much more common were discussion, dialogue, interaction, multiple participation. Drawing on both the New Testament and patristic texts, Norrington concludes that the normality and central role of monologue preaching in many churches today has no biblical precedent or support from the post-Apostolic period.

Where did this emphasis on monologue preaching come from? Norrington argues that it was the result of churches gradually adopting from the surrounding pagan culture assumptions about communication and, in particular, a rhetorical model that was more concerned about demonstrating the skill and knowledge of the speaker than about the impact on the listeners. The monologue sermon, he argues, achieved a central place in the church not because this place was biblical or even traditional within the early churches, but because the church was adopting somewhat uncritically the norms and values of contemporary cultural practices.

If Norrington is correct, this is very important. If monologue preaching today is under attack as inappropriate in contemporary culture, it makes a difference to our response if we discover that this practice developed originally under the influence of a different culture. If both the practice of preaching and its perceived inadequacies are primarily the result of cultural changes, we need not defend it with the vigour that we would if we were dealing with a matter of biblical precedent or theological principle.

But it does not end there. Norrington argues further

that the trend away from interaction and multiple participation towards monologue preaching was linked to a number of other developments in the fourth and fifth centuries. During this era the church was becoming respectable and increasingly conventional following the adoption of Christianity as the imperial religion. Huge numbers of half-converted pagans were flooding into the churches. Congregations were swelling in numbers and massive church buildings were being erected. Monologue preaching seemed the only realistic option in large basilicas with thousands in the congregation who had little understanding of even the basics of the faith.

It is certainly arguable that the size of congregations and the architecture of church buildings have had through the centuries at least as much influence on the way churches operate as biblical and theological principles. But two other changes in the church that had been coming for some time but which rapidly developed in this period also affected the style of preaching. The first was the decline of charismatic gifts and ministries within the church. These had required opportunities for participation by those who were gifted in diverse ways. But as church life became steadily more formal and institutional gifts such as prophecy became inconvenient and unsettling. Sermons were much safer. The dominance of the preacher grew as these gifts were marginalized. The second change was the gradual development of a clerical caste and the increasing dominance of the clergy over the laity. In a so-called Christian empire, the old distinction between 'church' and 'world' was disappearing, to be replaced by a new division between 'clergy' and 'laity'. And the clergy were demanding the same kind of authority as secular leaders and professionals. In this hierarchical environment, the clergy preached and the laity listened.

Norrington's argument is important and disturbing. It is one thing to resist challenges to preaching on the basis that we should not be unduly influenced by contemporary culture—although this begs some important theological questions. But it is quite another to face the challenge of whether monologue preaching is itself a cultural intrusion that is not fully compatible with a biblical model of the church.

Is Norrington correct? Some have challenged his conclusions: critics have raised concerns both about the way in which he has defined preaching and his selective use of sources. It may be that he has over-stated his case in some places, but his research is careful and he has amassed a significant amount of evidence to support his claims. Other early church historians are broadly in agreement with him. They argue that the biblical and post-biblical evidence suggests that 'sermons' were frequently contributions to a dialogue rather than stand-alone monologues, that interaction and participation was normal.

The litmus test

One way of testing his conclusions is to examine later movements in church history which questioned or rejected some of the aspects of church life which Norrington claims were influential in the development of the monologue sermon. If we find groups which challenged clericalism, recovered charismatic gifts, operated through smaller and more intimate gatherings and had high expectations of the level of faith and understanding of church members, but who nevertheless continued to rely primarily on the monologue sermon, we may be less impressed by his arguments. Of course, groups which challenge such long-held traditions and pioneer new ways of operating cannot be expected to question everything at once. But we might at least expect to find some experiments in interactive preaching.

What we actually find is considerably more than sporadic experiments. Three groups in European church history which fit the criteria are the 12th century Waldensians, the 14th century Lollards and the 16th century Anabaptists. Common to all these movements was an expectation that the Spirit would lead them into truth, that the Spirit worked through all, not just through preachers and leaders, and therefore that interaction was crucial. My doctoral research into how the Anabaptists handled the Bible alerted me to the issue of interactive preaching. Although they did not abandon sermons, they were wary of monologues and critical of the lack of participation in the Catholic and Protestant churches around them. They were outspoken about this issue and argued from Scripture that something was wrong. An early Anabaptist tract quoted Paul in I Corinthians 14 urging that all should contribute when the church met together and complained: 'When some one comes to church and hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent . . . who can or will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation?' The reformers had proclaimed the priesthood of all believers but the Anabaptists, their contemporaries, were not impressed with what they found in the reformers' churches. The monopoly of the Catholic priest seemed to have been replaced by the monopoly of the reformed preacher. Experts were still disempowering the congregation and hindering it from becoming mature.

Many Anabaptist congregations consciously moved away from the monologue tradition towards a more interactive style with multiple participation and dialogue. An Anabaptist under interrogation in 1527, Ambrosius Spitelmaier, explained how this worked: 'When they have come together, they teach one another the divine Word and one asks the other: how do you understand this saying? Thus there is among them a diligent living according to the divine Word.' Among Anabaptists there were three common convictions about how God spoke to his people: first, that

listening to the Holy Spirit was more important in understanding Scripture than education or ordination; second, that the Holy Spirit might speak through any member of the church as they meditated on the Bible; and third, that hearing and discerning the Word of God was a community practice rather than an individual practice. Multiple participation, dialogue and interaction were vital.

As I studied the Anabaptists, I discovered that they were but the latest example of an alternative radical tradition, that there were movements in earlier centuries who had espoused similar values and operated in similar ways. Some of these left little material for historians to study because of the severity of the persecution they experienced, but among both the Waldensians in southern France and northern Italy and the Lollards in England interactive learning, the empowerment of all church members and dialogue played a significant part.

Historian Louis Kaelber describes the Waldensians as a 'textual community'.⁴ The interpretation of Scripture was the central task of the community, and it was within the community that this task was undertaken. Malcolm Lambert, whose book, *Medieval Heresy*, provides an authoritative introduction to medieval dissident movements, writes that the availability of vernacular Bibles provided the Waldensians with 'the opportunity for direct instruction and self-instruction through the plain text', but he recognizes that this opportunity was enjoyed within reading circles where lay people could participate actively and communally, 'in contrast to their passive role at orthodox services'.⁵

The Lollards similarly were known for their reading circles and discussion of the Bible. Although preaching played a crucial role in the spread of the movement, this was not necessarily monologue preaching. Discussion, learning together, challenging the preachers, contributing insights—these were also involved. Anne Hudson, the leading historian of the Lollard movement, describes Lollard sermons and comments: 'The preacher's conclusion indicates that he is willing to cope with questions immediately, that he expects his congregation to take some pains over its content'. She concludes: 'Discussion obviously formed, along with reading and preaching, the basic ingredient of Lollard education.' Indeed, she suggests that many Lollard sermons were 'in the nature of preaching materials rather than finished discourses'.⁶

The double challenge

So, challenges to monologue preaching come both from those who recognize that it is an inappropriate form of communication in contemporary culture and from those who argue that the predominance of this

form of communication lacks biblical and historical support and is rooted in a hierarchical and clerical understanding of church life which disempowers most church members and limits the freedom of the Spirit to work through the whole body. In our postmodern and post-Christendom environment, perhaps we need to re-examine our biblical roots, learn from earlier pioneering movements and have the courage to do things differently.

Are there signs of this happening? There are certainly some counter-signs that indicate that the monologue sermon is far from defunct. Not only does the sermon continue to dominate most churches in all the main denominations, but many new churches—charismatic, ethnic, seeker-sensitive and others—continue to employ the sermon with enthusiasm, often at greater length than in more established churches. Furthermore, there are several well-known organizations committed to training and equipping those employing this form of communication. Among these are Proclamation Trust, the College of Preachers which has just relocated to Spurgeon's College and whose director has the office next to mine, and colleges like Spurgeon's itself. These groups and individuals are well aware of concerns about the sermon and are committed to helping preachers develop their skills and be more effective communicators. While I applaud these efforts, I wonder whether a more radical overhaul is needed.

The charges against the dominance of monologue preaching are as follows:

- (1) this is not the way in which Jesus, the apostles or the New Testament churches operated;
- (2) this is a practice which became dominant as the church moved away from its roots, adopted pagan cultural practices and became formal and institutional;
- (3) the monologue sermon tends to impoverish, disempower and de-skill congregations;
- (4) this is not a form of communication that is appropriate in contemporary culture;
- (5) there are alternatives practised by dissident movements throughout history and churches among the urban poor today.

Back to the future

It is all very well criticizing monologue sermons. What are the alternatives? I want to suggest that interactive preaching is characterised by four features.

First, it is *learner-focused*, concerned more about what is learned than what is taught, more about the outcome than the methodology. If Norrington is correct, preaching went wrong when it became more concerned about crafting good sermons than ensuring that people were learning and growing. Interactive

preaching is concerned about results, about growth in understanding and maturity, about connecting with the issues and life situations of congregations. This might require us to invite suggestions about subjects for sermons, to welcome the participation of those with experience in areas where the regular preacher does not, to gather honest feedback on the impact of the preaching on the congregation.

Second, it is *multi-voiced*, not dominated by one voice but open to participation by many people. It recognizes that nobody has a monopoly on revelation or wisdom, that there are resources in the congregation that will enable the Word of God to be heard with much greater power and clarity if these are released. It picks up the cry of Moses: 'Would that all God's people were prophets!' It believes Peter's claim on the day of Pentecost that the Spirit is poured out on all flesh, as Joel had prophesied, so that young and old, male and female can bring revelation to the people of God.

Third, it is *open-ended*, prepared to leave loose ends and to live with uncertainty, to run the risk of allowing people space to think, to reflect, to explore, to ask how biblical teaching might apply to their situation. Interactive preaching is never the final word but a process of learning together, reflecting both on experience and on the Scriptures. It offers resources rather than rules, sees discipleship as a journey rather than a fixed state, poses questions rather than dispensing answers, invites ownership rather than imposing conclusions. It endorses the conviction of the Pilgrim Fathers that 'the Lord has yet more light to break forth out of his Word'.

Fourth, it is *dialogue-based*, making room for questions, comments, challenges, ideas and exploration. This might mean drawing the congregation into sermons by asking questions, inviting responses, welcoming insights. It might mean discussion groups during or after sermons. It might mean changing the way the chairs are arranged to make dialogue and discussion possible. It might mean having two speakers debating an issue together, with congregational participation. It might mean asking several people to reflect on a passage for a week and then construct a sermon together. It might mean inviting a congregation to do some preparatory reading during the week so that they can contribute thoughtfully to a teaching period. It might mean developing a culture where people know they are free to interrupt and interject comments.

Could this happen? Yes, it could. I have been experimenting with interactive preaching over the past few years and about 80% of the time now use some form of interactive approach. But I recognize that there are significant obstacles to overcome, even if you are

convinced that this is worth pursuing. Among these are the following:

- (1) congregations are locked into monologue preaching and are threatened by anything different. However boring or unproductive monologue sermons may be, they are at least safe, familiar and undemanding. Interactive preaching is none of these things: introducing it may not be popular.
- (2) the sermon is seen as sacrosanct, often based on misinterpreting certain texts such as *I Corinthians 1:21*. The historical and cultural aspects of the development of this style of communication are not recognized.
- (3) preachers are very wary of interactive methods. We may feel insecure, liable to be put on the spot, doing something we were not trained to do. We may not feel we have the skills to cope with this.
- (4) preachers prefer to preach monologue sermons. Not only is it safer, it feels more satisfying, more fulfilling, more 'anointed'. Putting it bluntly, preacher satisfaction takes precedence over congregational growth. Our response to cultural shifts and evidence of low levels of understanding and interest may be to try harder, to use more stories or visual aids, and to do another preaching course. This may help, but it does not address the deeper issues.

If interactive preaching is to catch on, both preachers and congregations will need to be re-trained and re-orientated. This will take time. It will require persistence and courage. But it may be that nothing less is required for church life in the 21st century.

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Footnotes

- 1 Klaus Runia: *The Sermon Under Attack* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983).
- 2 Grove Pastoral Series No. 68 (Cambridge, 1996).
- 3 David Norrington: *To Preach or not to Preach* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996).
- 4 Louis Kaelber: 'Other- and Inner-Worldly Asceticism in Medieval Waldensianism', *Sociology of Religion* (1995) Vol. 56, p. 100.
- 5 Malcolm Lambert: *Medieval Heresy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 151.
- 6 Anne Hudson: *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 185, 192.